Abstract: There is currently a certain pressure from various mnemonic communities, animated by vernacular interests, to canonize new saints within what is regarded as the flawed saints' cultural-political movement. Among these new, uncanonized saints, whose memory is commemorated unofficially in various cultural-political registers, there is also the football star Diego Armando Maradona, called by his millions of fans “the Hand of God” (La Mano de Dios). The commemorative culture that thrived around Maradona’s persona—materialized in artefacts, shrines, icon-like paintings, prints, graffiti, stencils, and other memorabilia—do not fit the customary narratives of sainthood, nor to the display and content of the recently inaugurated (2023) memorial to the new martyrs of both the 20th and 21st centuries at Saint Bartholomew Basilica in Rome. The article argues that the commemoration of Maradona by his fans in Italy, Argentina, and worldwide is enacted in pop culture formats aimed at addressing different sets of contemporary mnemonic and spiritual needs. The aim is to offer a fresh conceptual engagement with the contemporary cultural-political phenomenon of “flawed saints” commemoration through the lens of contemporary popular culture, taking the culture of commemoration of Diego Maradona as a case study.

Keywords: flawed saints; Saint Maradona; religious commemoration; vernacular commemoration; religious street art; sports religion; popular culture

1. Introduction

There is a need for spiritual well-being that sometimes also includes religious or religious-like performances, semantic contents, and actions. The contemporary human being is more prone to indulge in cultural practices that enhance their well-being, and hypermedia societies and digitalization add up and mediate the extent to which “spirituality is best construed as part of well-being, or as a possible influence on well-being” (Ryff 2021, p. 1). Within this framework of reference, sports, and especially football—regarded as “the universal secular religion”—is oftentimes regarded as a “spiritual enterprise” that enhances well-being (Miller 2008). Popular culture also plays an important role in the dissemination of this “spiritual enterprise”. Street art, as a form of contemporary popular culture, is no exception. One of the stencils attributed to the contemporary street artist known as Banksy displays a crucified Jesus depicted in a Bristol City football jersey accompanied by the caption “RELIGION” underneath. The connotation of this visual piece of pop culture goes beyond the mere humor and mockery, and rather means that “Banksy’s interpretation of Jesus in a Bristol City jersey comments on modern society’s obsession with sport and its similarities of rituals and togetherness that mirror what Christianity used to be to society”.¹

The academic literature on the religion of sport emphasizes various dimensions of what is taken to be a spiritual experience, whose implications for human well-being go beyond mere entertainment (Fulconis and Pache 2014; Shilling and Mellor 2014; Marty 2017; Mazurkiewicz 2018; Trothen 2019). Currently, even institutionalized religions play a role in football associations and, consequently, sport and religion social scientists document the journey of football from the 16th century puritan Christians who vehemently opposed
this sport to current Christian (and other denominations) football leagues and competitions. Within football as a “religious phenomenon”, there are attempts to classify the spiritual pillars of footfall as the ritual participation in football related events, the worship and veneration of the players, the community of fans/believers who share their fidelity to this sport, and the search for meaning (Fulconis and Pache 2014). Yet, the exploration of football through the angle of religion “not only can lead to an in-depth understanding of these phenomena but can also shed light on some aspects of modern Western societies” (Barnat 2019, p. 30).

I would add that this systematic investigation can illuminate not only the human condition of modern Western societies but also the modern subject of the rest of the world. Barnat elaborates on why religion and modern sport (football included) should not be seen as identical phenomena, emphasizing that comparing them “requires a substantive-functional approach to religion in which the indication of the similarities between sport and religion is complemented by articulation and description of their significant differences”. (Barnat 2019, p. 30) This article’s aim is to focus only on the second pillar (the veneration of players) from an interdisciplinary perspective combining theoretical frameworks from cultural studies, memory studies, religious culture, and philosophical aesthetics. The case study I engage with zooms in on the public culture of vernacular commemoration of one of the world’s most famous and cherished football celebrities—Diego Armando Maradona (1960–2020). The Argentinian football star’s career and his larger-than-life public persona are still recalled and commemorated—including in a sainthood register—in the popular culture and vernacular memory formats. However, it must be noted that Maradona’s memory is not universally cherished. Italians from the North of the country and the fans of British football most likely do not share the enthusiasm and devotion rooted in Naples and Argentina.

The legacy of Maradona is usually tackled within celebrity studies research (Free 2013); cinema studies/popular culture (Bauer 2021); material culture (Hughson and Moore 2012); health communication; and drugs prevention research (Brown and Matviuk 2010). There is also a recently published edited volume that lays the ground of the emerging academic field of Maradonian Studies (Brescia and Paz 2023a). As the editors point out “Maradona is much more than a sporting legend. He has been read as an emancipatory political figure, a secular saint, a symbol of subalternity and, by others, an anti-hero (cheat, addict, opportunist)”. (Brescia and Paz 2023b, p. 1154) Maradona is deeply and unconditionally loved, and it comes as no surprise that football fans—and others—mourned the death of a symbol, and the collective grief exacerbated the magnitude of an irreplaceable loss. The commemorative culture that bourgeoned around Maradona’s character—materialized in artefacts, shrines, religious icon-like paintings, prints, graffiti, stencils, and other memorabilia—do not fit the customary narratives of canonical sainthood. And yet, what underpins the mnemonic interests of those who commemorate Maradona’s life and legacy in a sainthood register? What do individuals mean by calling Maradona a “saint”?

Maradona’s life and career trajectory is far from what a sainthood repertoire would require: the normative criterion of martyrdom (Patristic Church’s imperative to accept canonization) is not applicable, and the heroic virtue of performing miracles, “which became a necessary element to both beatification and canonization” in the Christian tradition later on (Gribble 2011, p. 1) is also debatable, unless the goal scored with the hand during the quarter final match of the FIFA World Cup in 1986 is seen as a “miraculous” salvation for the Argentinian team. Moreover, Maradona himself famously emphasized that the goal was scored “a little with the head of Maradona and a little with the hand of God”. While Maradona is also remembered in the negative registers of drug addict, cheater, and unscrupulous—albeit by fewer—the narrative of “sainthood” had to adapt to incorporate discursive patterns according to which the “saints are not perfect; like all human beings they were incomplete and broken people who had their failures and at times did not lead lives consistent with their saintly recognition”. (Gribble 2011, p. 1) The cultural memory of Maradona reveals the humble side (and origins) of the star whose actions and public
discourses alleviate and bring hope to the poor, marginal, and disenfranchised. His football-related skills are also recalled as being akin to art: “Maradona is the Caravaggio of the 20th century,” and “with him art becomes art”. (Vittorio Sgarbi) The analogy with Caravaggio’s art refers to how both celebrities (in different historical contexts) made room for the voice of the marginal to be heard by rendering beauty and awe to those who are usually on the fringes of society.

To understand the cultural memory and commemoration of Maradona one needs to recall the “secular divine experiences” (Siskind 2020) that the sport celebrity occasioned on the pitch. Siskind posited in an interview with The Harvard Gazette that this “divine experience” is closer to an aesthetic experience in the sense that watching Maradona playing was “akin to transcendence”, as is “Picasso painting ‘Guernica’”, “Beethoven”, and “Ringo rehearsing at Abbey Road Studios to record the White Album” (Siskind 2020). What Siskind’s remarks disclose is that even for the non-religious people, gazing at their idol Maradona’s performance on the pitch equates an “aesthetic experience” that “is in some way important for spiritual well-being” (Wynn 2018, p. 397). These considerations bring us closer to Austin’s argument that individuals often portray the religious and aesthetic experience similarly because the experiences themselves are quite similar, whereas the conceptual frameworks employed to interpret and make sense of them might differ for the aesthete and religious believer (Austin 1980).

Yet, what Austin’s study overlooks is that the epistemologies, ontologies, and ethical realms of art (akin to the religious experience) do not account for the entirety of aesthetic experiences, since under the label “aesthetic experience” we do not only contemplate art (and beauty of art) but also natural objects (e.g., natural beauty, sublime). The aesthetic experience is not limited to art objects, performances, and forms but we can also experience aesthetically the sublime of a storm or the beauty of a sunset, and these aesthetic experiences might not share the same attributes with the “morality of art” and its aesthetic experiencing. Maradona’s sport performance has also been described by employing metaphors pertaining to the natural world (rather than to art). The football star was often called in mass media “a force of nature” (The Tribune, Daily Times 2020), “Stormrider” (Sport Magazine, 2019), or “Argentina’s one-man hurricane” (The National News, 2021).

The beauty and amazingness of Maradona’s performances on the pitch might have occasioned in viewers a sense of astonishment like what one encounters when contemplating nature and natural phenomena that trigger experiences of sublime, delight, or beauty. Thus, “Argentina’s one-man hurricane”’s performance is aesthetically experienced on “its own terms” like we experience the sublime in nature (e.g., of a hurricane) since “appreciating nature on its own terms” might well involve experiencing it considering various cultural and historical traditions. Thus, in appropriate aesthetic appreciation, “local and regional narratives, folklore, and even mythological stories about nature are endorsed” (Carlson 2023). The “secular divine experiences” Maradona’s performance occasioned in the football fans contributed to the nimbus of sanctity with which his collective memory is shrouded in the public cultural sphere in Italy (Naples), Argentina, and worldwide.

This article is framed by the theoretical assumption that Maradona’s commemoration in cultural-political-religious registers has more to do with the emotions of awe that are usually occasioned by nature’s forces (e.g., storm, hurricane). Awe is defined in the vicinity of the aesthetic category of the sublime as “a complex emotion or emotional construct characterized by a mix of positive (contentment, happiness), and negative affective components (fear and a sense of being smaller, humbler or insignificant)” (Arcangeli et al. 2020, p. 1340). There is a stream of philosophical arguments holding that morality has no bearing on the aesthetic appreciation about nature, since for David Hume moral sublime is distinct from natural sublimity. Even if both are forms of aesthetic experience, the moral sublimity is dissimilar from the natural sublime based on their objects: “A human subject, a person of heroic virtue, is the object of the aesthetic experience of the moral sublime, whereas natural phenomena are the objects of aesthetic experience of the natural sublime” (Neill 1997, p. 246). The second description fits Maradona’s perception and identification
with the amoral “forces of nature”. The main objective of this article is to engage in the interdisciplinary analysis of how simple visual representations of Maradona as a patron saint in the popular visual culture of Naples becomes a vernacular memory culture that challenges hegemonies and celebrates categories of “pure saints”.

2. Materials and Methods

Data collection consisted of visual ethnography and photo/video documentation of the shrines, street art, and vernacular memorabilia dedicated to Diego Maradona in Naples. The research trips took place in September 2022 and May 2024. The purpose of this temporal spacing was to zoom in on the extent to which the commemorative culture of Maradona has augmented, modified in semantic contents and vicarious memories. Fieldwork was completed with four in-depth interviews conducted in May 2024 with the recurrent customers of the Bar Nilo (in Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples). The time frame considered for the selection of primary data covers the period after the death of the football celebrity when the vernacular commemorative culture of Maradona had boomed.

The criteria employed for selecting the burgeoning visual data—over 120 commemorative street art pieces—fall into two groups: visual artefacts of religious inspiration produced via popular culture in Naples and mnemonic artifacts of religious inspiration. The selection of visual data considers the methodological demands of “collection from one point of view only”, being based exclusively upon popular culture’s visual artifacts (Bauer and Aarts 2011). The analysis of data circumscribes popular culture’s visual production, considering the homogeneity criteria. The data selected are not a mixture of visual and auditory (e.g., pop music) sources that would require different methodological approaches. The visual data were examined through critical visual analysis in line with the methodological direction according to which visual language was a social and mnemonic practice meant to reveal how simple representations of Maradona as a saint of Naples became a vernacular memory culture that confronts hegemonies. The analysis is informed by theoretical considerations pertaining to interpretations of the intersections of world religions and sports as both “morally good” and “morally bad” (Alpert 2015) and by arguments on how religions change and are in turn changed by the popular cultures in which they are embedded (Forbes 2017).

3. A City of “Imminent Moral Doom”: Naples

The city of Naples can be regarded as one of the cradles from which the popular “religiosity” surrounding Maradona’s persona takes shape. Naples’ obsession with football gave birth to fanaticism of different sorts, and the veneration of Maradona in a religious register is no exception. The city “of imminent doom” (Jones 2023) used to have a bad reputation, constantly battling mafia and criminality (in addition to the waste management crisis). The so-called “Italy’s most chaotic city” witnessed dark episodes of impunity making its reputation even more dire also in terms of moral chaos. This deleterious moral aura goes back to the 18th century when the myth of a “criminal hero” was born.

The flawed sainthood assigned to Maradona by Napolitanas is not surprising as the inhabitants of Naples have historically indulged in commemorations and venerations of “impure heroes” (Mihai 2022). Recent research has showed how an Augustinian friar (Leopoldo di San Pasquale) generated a massive literary culture and fostered a political culture in 18th century Naples. The friar was tried in 1757 by the hierarchies of his own religious order for sexual immorality, heresy, and financial fraud. In response, Leopoldo di San Pasquale blamed the religious authorities of immoral conduct, including for “entombing him alive” (Palmieri 2024). The trial became a “cultural phenomenon unlike any witnessed before in Napoli” and “ultimately transformed Leopoldo into a public spectacle—or what we might call today a ‘celebrity’” (Palmieri 2024, p. 1). The culture of impure heroes in Naples has a long tradition and the cult of Maradona diversifies it on contemporary grounds.
4. Flawed Sainthood

A huge mural depicting an aged and feeble Maradona covers the side of an entire block of flats in San Giovanni Teduccio, the “Bronx” of Naples. The mural is titled in red captions “Dios Umano”. To understand why individuals, commemorate Maradona in a sainthood-symbolic frame is convoluted, and it does not only resort to arguments pertaining to the view that the football idol sided with the marginals, underdogs, and “slum kids” of the global village. It also does not resort to the views that the football related performances were rendered “divine” because of the involvement of the “hand of God”. Hence, philosophical, and theological questions about the morality of sainthood are required to back up the understanding of the Saint Maradona phenomenon. Has morality any bearing on the reality of sainthood? Undoubtedly, in some mnemonic communities Maradona is treated like a saint and the veneration goes beyond mere metaphor and metonymy. At first sight it is intriguing that a self-confessed cheat, a drug addict, a tax revisionist, and a flawed father is venerated in a sainthood registry. However, the reality of sainthood does not follow the criteria of moral sainthood, and actual saints like Gandhi might embody sainthood through different forms of merit (Adams 1984). It follows that actual sainthood is manifest through various forms of excellence and saints are not moral perfectionists, as Susan Wolf argued (Wolf 1982). The flaws they display do not prevent their unconditional trust in God as the supreme provider of their growth and well-being. The “Saint Maradona” phenomenon reveals that sainthood might not be universally accepted, yet for the communities involved in active veneration, moral goodness in every action does not constitute the main criterion of sainthood. Adams argues that, unlike the traditional criteria of moral sainthood, the actual saints are not perceived as unattractive, dull, and lacking in individuality. Often, they are pictured as “eccentric” and “extraordinary”, or peculiar. Furthermore, the atypical capacity for joy demarcates these saints from the conventional norm of moral sainthood. The reality of sainthood reveals saints who are acknowledged to possess an exceptional capacity for joy, and of experiencing distinctive joys “that only they can know” (Adams 1984).

This unique joy is comodeled with the unconditional trust in God regarded as the supreme source of well-being. Actual saints display a “spirituality of imperfection” that does not fit the panoply of “plaster saints who are so heavenly minded they are of no earthly use” (Devenish 2017, p. 112). Those who venerate Maradona in Naples—and elsewhere—confess that their reverence “goes beyond hero worship and it feels as though he is looked at as some kind of religious figure, even a god” (Cris Italia). For the fans and worshipers, Maradona’s flaws do not shadow his joy for God, nor his fending for the poor. Hana Roberts points out that the football celebrity is venerated as a saint in Naples, whereas in Northern Italy the editorial of the Il Giornale newspaper, owned by the Berlusconi family, called him a “cheat, drug addict, alcoholic, violent sexist with women, tax evader and communist: the worst of the worst of the worst”. Football fanaticism plays a significant role in Maradona’s veneration. The unenthusiastic descriptions of the football star in the Berlusconi press are grounded in the rivalry between the AC Milan club (owned by Berlusconi) and Maradona’s team in Napoli.

This shows that his sainthood is not collectively accepted, not even in Italy. Yet, the unofficial saint patron of Naples continues to elicit awe and reverence even after his death. During his lifetime Maradona has been regarded as a living God and the culture of commemoration burgeoning after he passed away continues this relationship of the locals with a saint “alive”. Their saint performed uncontested “miracles” on the pitch that played a gigantic role in the Napolitanas life and self-esteem, helping the city get rid of its inferiority complex toward the wealthier north of Italy. One of the official saint patrons of Naples is Saint Gennaro who perished as a martyr in 305 A.D. Saint Gennaro is commemorated as the saint who answered people’s prayers in 1631, preventing the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and salving the city from a catastrophe. The same narrative of salvation shrouds Maradona’s veneration, of how he saved the dignity of the poor South of Italy. The culture of commemoration of Maradona is enacted in pop culture formats aimed at addressing different sets of contemporary mnemonic, political, social, and spiritual
needs. The two saint patrons of Naples are commemorated in religious registers whose connotations correspond to different sets of existential concerns. The cultural memory of Maradona—as the savior of the dignity of the Italians from the South—fortifies the belief that the hand of God is always protecting and providing, alleviating pain, and spreading joy to those in need and looked down upon. What is more, and in line with the answers of the residents of the city I interviewed, Saint Maradona is more “like us”, and at the same time “closer to God’s will”, guaranteeing a more mundane alliance with a “father-like figure” than with a saint patron who lived thousands of years ago (Saint Gennaro). Although a “devil’s advocate” might have enough evidence to contest Maradona’s de jure sainthood status, de facto the mnemonic communities of Naples preserve the culture of veneration of their contemporary saint of choice. The online commemorative culture also extends the veneration started in the offline public spaces. Digital nomads, tourists, and adventurers also recall their encounters with Saint Maradona, and their online testimonies are not without expressive and emotional weight (especially masculine emotions are conveyed in the online space): “A few tears came down while walking around napoli...A place that adopted Maradona as their local saint”; “my beloved legend”; “the soul and faith of my youth”; “santo Diego, Make Love!”; and “Dios Umano” (human god). The image of the football celebrity reverberates today as “more a victim than a criminal, perhaps “redeemed” by suffering, fragile survivor of his own impulses: that is the image that gains ground in popular thought, and that has been growing for a long time” (Lojo 2023, p. 242).

One textile piece of art (Figure 1) represents Maradona with a halo of saint and many arms recalling the non-Christian deities Durga, Shiva, Kali, or Vishnu, all belonging to the Hindu religious culture. The visual artifact is sold online either as a decorative tapestry or as a sticker. Most of the deities of Hinduism are pictured with multiple arms epitomizing their supranatural ability to perform various tasks simultaneously. The analogy with Maradona’s multitasking ability to perform both “earthly” activities (i.e., drinking alcohol) and spiritual ones is visually underlined. Unlike the Hindu deities, the four arms of Maradona with a halo of saint do not epitomize the omnipotence to fight the evil but the inherent ambivalence of human nature who indulges in “earthly” activities and contemplates the “heaven” in the manner of benediction simultaneously. As Maria Rosa Lojo pointed out—when asked if Maradona could become a “pagan saint”—it is exactly “the combination of the features described above that make Maradona the ideal candidate for canonization. Primarily, a popular saint does not require moral superiority” (Lojo 2023, p. 241). At the same time, there is also a certain degree of mystery and fascination involved in Maradona’s culture of commemoration since “his miraculous seven years in Napoli were a mixture of chaos, delight, unparalleled joy and crushing sadness”. The mixed range of emotions, elicited by the presence of the football star, metaphorically correspond to the many arms displayed in the visual representation. The earthly–heavenly polarization, as well as the in-betweenness of the two is also revealed in the collective memory of the inhabitants of Naples since “Diego is our saint. He is the only one who knows how it feels to be in the sky, floating on a cloud to just be crushed to the soil with such a violent force of fate” (Interview with BV, men, 60 years old). Thus, Maradona is not remembered as the “saint” patron of Naples for what his fans perceive as “miracles” but for his “human, all too human” worldview with which many identify and re-signify it as God’s will and “hand”.
5. Vernacular Cultures of Commemoration: The Folk Saint Maradona

Cultures of commemoration have different symbolic contents and can be constituted in various ways, not all of them emerging from a central authority. Although the cultures of commemoration vary, “it is a centralizing power that can often have the most considerable impact on such cultures” (Low et al. 2012, p. 3). In the case study explored in this article, the official memory of sainthood plays a central role in what regards the form of the visual artifacts, yet the semantic content displays different meanings and ends the venerated image is put to. The official ecclesiastical authority decides and defines who are saints and “inscribes them in the catalogue of saints, stating that their memory should be kept with pious devotion by the universal Church”.9 However, parallel to the memory of the canonized saints, another culture of commemoration vernacularly constituted might “canonize” unofficially a saint “without official solemnization by the Church”.9 While the official criteria of canonizing saints, as well as the official commemorative culture around them, are well-known, it is still unclear what prompts the vernacular cultures of commemoration of uncanonized saints. Considered in a contemporary perspective, this necessity can be understood as a quest for the spiritual well-being of those individuals and communities who do not find traction in the panoply of established saints whose “role model” is unsuited to modern life or to imperfect lives as such. Maradona’s case reveals why for some communities there is no need for their saints to be perfect; it is enough if the popular saint elect “speaks the language of the people”. Thus, the commemoration of Maradona in a sainthood register in Naples originates “from the people”, encapsulating what David Gibson called the “populism of spirituality”.10

Naples is like no other Italian city. All over the city there are hundreds of small shrines dedicated to various saints, big and small, and the omnipresence of this culture of commemoration of religious inspiration makes the Southern Italian city a veritable plein air memorial church. Among the variety of saints and shrines devoted to their memory, Maradona’s altar and shrines come as no surprise. The altar dedicated to the footballer at the Nilo Bar, close to Piazza Dante in the city’s center, displays many memorabilia dedicated to Maradona, including a lock of Maradona’s “miraculous” hair preserved in a glass ampoule. The valuable relic is daily visited by Neapolitans and tourists alike. The pilgrimage to Maradona’s altar at Bar Nilo combines Christian and pagan elements in a symphony of reverence. According to media reports the shrine was built in 1991—when presumably the

Figure 1. Saint Diego the Futbolista, textile art.
owner of Nilo found a lock of Maradona’s hair on a flight they took together—and it grows every year, adding up new visual memorabilia. The vernacular commemoration resembles the side-road memorials dedicated to the victims of car accidents. A small banner on top of the altar reads “Lacrime Napoletane 1991” (the tears of Naples 1991), whereas at the basis of the altarpiece we read “Capello Miraculous di Diego Armando Maradona” (the miraculous hair of Diego Armando Maradona).

Public memory is formed by official and vernacular memory, each contributing to the formatting of what is known as “collective public memory”. There is a link between collective memory and representation since memory (in this case of Maradona) with a halo of sanctity in the cultural public sphere of Naples is materialized in visual representations created by certain mnemonic communities and “memory entrepreneurs”. John Bodnar argued that “public memory emerges from the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions” (Bodnar 2011, p. 265). He also elaborated on what “official” and “vernacular” memory cultures are and do. “Official memory”, is very much in line with the official culture of elites (cultural, religious, and political leaders) whose main aim is to establish certain more or less hegemonic narratives about the past “that reduce the power of competing interests that threaten the attainment of their goals” (Bodnar 2011, p. 265). If we apply this theoretical framework of memory studies to the case study of Maradona’s commemoration of religious descent, it follows that the culture of remembrance associated with the football star does not fit the official memory criteria. The culture of commemoration displayed in Naples (as well as in the Global South) around Maradona’s person can be understood by employing the concept of vernacular commemoration (memory). Unlike official memory, the vernacular one “represents an array of specialized interests that are grounded in parts of the whole. They are diverse and changing and can be reformulated from time to time by the creation of new social units” (Bodnar 2011, p. 265). The vernacular commemoration of Maradona fits this account, and the thematic clusters of the main representations are diverse and fluid, as well as open to change and re-writing within the popular culture of Naples.

5.1. Nilo Bar Shrine

The altar piece dedicated to Maradona at Nilo Bar encapsulates a vernacular memorial format comprising objects belonging to the dead (the lock of hair), photographs of the dead, statues of other official Catholic saints, religious artifacts, Euro banknotes, souvenirs left by tourists, Christmas globes in the color of Maradona’s football equipment, and many other small artifacts of various origins and sorts. Every time I visited the altar—at two years’ difference—the elements of the memorial were changed, and the form was re-arranged around the same central piece: the relic (the lock of hair). The glass recipient where the lock of hair is preserved “mirrors the ampule found in the city’s cathedral, which contains the blood of the Neapolitan patron San Gennaro—just one of the 52 saints who protect the city and are thought to provide Neapolitans with the defences to withstand years of poverty and social struggle” (Seymour 2020).

The constant build-up of the shrine dedicated to Maradona’s memory also encompasses written notes of the pilgrims, as well as other ephemeral objects. During the last visit, there was also an official portrait of Saint John Paul II hanging on the lateral wall of the shrine dedicated to the football star and some tourists and locals prayed to both official and unofficial saints (Saint John Paul II and Saint Diego). The presence of a canonic saint within the shrine of a folk one is not unique to Nilo Bar. As solid research on cultures of devotion in South America demonstrates, Catholic culture is not so much left behind but enlarged by folk practitioners; “it is stretched to encompass exceptional resources. Whereas Catholicism . . . defends a distinction between canonical and non-canonical or orthodox and heterodox, folk devotion intermingles these quite naturally and without reserve” (Graziano 2006, p. 29). If we relocate the analysis from the devotion cultures to cultures of remembrance (and/or commemoration), Maradona’s case reveals that his public...
memory in Naples is fueled by both official and vernacular representations of sainthood. Although there is a burgeoning body of literature dedicated to Maradona, touching upon a variety of perspectives, there is little addressed in what regards the “grey zone” between official and vernacular cultures of commemoration enacted in the public sphere. As one of the recurrent customers I interviewed at the Nilo Bar posits: “The ‘usual’ saints of Naples and Italy have their iconography and standardized commemoration, and Maradona is also remembered within those general frames but also differently . . . don’t judge a book by its covers”. (NB, 46-year-old man) What does the “differently” entail and to what extent do the official and vernacular culture of saints’ commemoration intersect, and, more importantly, to what ends? These are the kind of questions unaddressed until now.

The Nilo Bar shrine is a spontaneously created memorial that does not belong to official, institutionalized cultural memory-making. It resembles the privately created and preserved roadside memorials that commemorate a site where a beloved person died (usually as a victim of a violent accident). Like the roadside memorials—and other vernacular cultures of commemoration—the Maradona shrine does not exhibit a standardized form, and its constant built-up can be regarded as a fluid cultural memory that is open to new meanings and ends to be put to. Candles, plush toys, banknotes, goodbye notes, flowers (fresh or artificial), plants, photographs, postcards, clothing items, and religious artifacts are all common elements that can be found in many vernacular memorials. Yet, the religiously inspired memorials (shrines) display several elements pertaining to sacred iconography—that appear recurrently and bear significance from a content analysis point of view. Another important distinction is in place: vernacular shrines (domestic or public) often display emotionally loaded elements that are not easily detectable in the institutionalized shrines of the canonized saints. This detail deserves a separate place to be discussed within the studies of cultural devotion. As far as memory cultures of religious inspiration are concerned, some emotions connected with the recollection of one’s past came to the forefront. By commemorating a saint’s life, the mnemonic performer recalls her/his own existence.

5.2. Maradona with Halo

The streets of Naples display many graffiti, stencils, and other public art formats picturing Maradona with a holy nimbus encircling his head. The representation pattern is ubiquitous, but Quartiere Spagnoli is the epicenter of this urban pop cultural format. The public art productions are created by both “established” graffiti artists and anonymous cultural producers. Some visual representations also display written messages (captions) such as “Our God, Maradona”, “The King of Football”, “Saint Diego”, “Saint of Napoli”, “Long Live the King”, or “Our Saint”. All these forms of cultural production function both as “street art” and cultural memory within contemporary popular culture. The relationship between popular culture and collective memory is explored from a variety of angles, including consumer culture (Leavy 2003); performance studies (Plate and Smelik 2013); and “the popular cultural memory in media texts” (Kukkonen 2008). Some popular culture productions are put to different ends, including religious and mnemonic. The link between religion and popular culture is usually illuminated through the prism of green Christianity (Wallace 2010); cultural studies (Klassen 2013); and online games and technology as a “surrogate for religion” (Bainbridge 2014).

As a form of popular culture, street art’s engagement with religious topics is often understood as pop art mocking or critiquing religion (Lynch 2007). This adverse approach of religion in popular culture’s productions is usually explained in terms of the inadequacy of institutionalized religion that has lost touch with the modern times to such an extent that it has become ungraspable. Many graffiti, stencils, and other murals depict religious symbols in an irreverent way (e.g., the famous Try Google graffiti attributed to Banksy where Jesus Christ admits that he does not have answers to all the questions of the world). However, street art worldwide has also started to embrace murals and graffiti as a contemporary path to worship. And as deceased people are worshiped in online games (Bainbridge
street art productions also convert into places of memory (lieux de memoire) that have become symbolic entities of the memorial heritage of various communities.

This re-signification of the cultural public sphere of the streets where worshiping is burgeoning can also be understood as a spiritual revolution “from below”. The culture of worshiping is no longer reserved to the official institutions and spaces but has extended to the cities’ and neighborhoods’ walls. Like other religiously inspired graffiti and murals, Maradona with Halo (Figure 2) representations in popular culture have an ambivalent function: (1) The employment of the religious symbolism in association with the sport celebrity can be put to entertainment or commercial ends (see Figure 3). (2) Maradona with Halo has become—especially after the football player’s tragic death—a lieu de memoire through-and-through, where some mnemonic actors commemorate and worship the memory of their hero elect through religiously loaded symbolism. This ambivalence in employing and understanding the Maradona with Halo pattern of representation is also reflected in the way passers-by (inhabitants of Naples and tourists alike) approach the visuals. While the reception of Maradona with Halo—a visual employed as an advertising for allegedly the only cafe in Naples where Maradona spritz is served (Figure 3)—is obviously humorous, other Maradona with Halo images scattered all over the city are worshiped and adorned with candles and flowers.

Figure 2. Maradona with Halo, Photo by the author.

What is worth considering is that although the Maradona with Halo visual cluster is put to at least two different (contrasting) ends in popular culture consumption, the visuals per se are “perceptually indistinguishable” (Danto 1981). At the level of perception, Maradona with a holy nimbus pattern of representation is indistinguishable, and “looks” identical on the blue spritz drinking glass as well as on the impromptu shrine meant to commemorate the football player. However, although perceptually indistinguishable, the Maradona(s) are distinguishable by means of meaning and “by means of non-perceptual aesthetic experience” (Koblížek 2023, p. 13; Shelley 2003). Thus, the non-perceptual aesthetic properties one might attribute to the Maradona street art piece (e.g., witty, holy, daring) do not depend on the five senses to be appreciated aesthetically. However, these non-perceptual aesthetic properties strike and move the viewer in the same way the sensuous reception does. My research on the popular culture of Naples also reveals that there is also a grey zone of meanings and ends in what regards the ubiquitous Maradona with Halo visual renderings. Another category of street art that falls under the same representational pattern (the football star with holy nimbus) is situated in between the commercial/entertainment ends and worship/commemorative ones. Several stencils and elaborate mural paintings...
display a Maradona with a halo and a papal-like tiara (Figure 4). These visual productions can be understood as either humorous and witty or as critical towards the institutionalized religion. Another hermeneutical path can interpret them as both commemorative and entertaining without excluding the meaning of critique.

![Figure 3. Maradona Spritz, photo by the author.](image3)

![Figure 4. Maradona with Halo and Papal Tiara, photo by the author.](image4)

The claim concerning the in-between(ess) of the ends the religiously inspired representations are put, is also supported by all three interviewees who celebrate Maradona’s persona at the Nilo Bar. They noticed that the same representation of the “Saint Diego” can be put to different ends, and this is not seen as a problem, on the contrary: these
are regarded as tactical repositioning against a given semantic, economic, existential, and political background.

5.3. Maradona in Nativity Scenes

Another area of Naples where Maradona’s traces have grown a rich cultural memory materialized in popular culture visuals is Via Saint Gregorio Armeno (known as “Christmas Alley”). Like in the Spanish Quarters, here too, venerators of Maradona have created impromptu sites of commemoration. Interestingly, “Christmas Alley” is well-known for the numerous artisanal small shops that commercialize miniatures of the Nativity scenes (presepe napoletano) alongside various statuettes of pop culture’s celebrities such as Madonna, John Lennon, Charlie Chaplin, or Elvis, as well facetious figurines of renown politicians, ranging from Margaret Thatcher to Obama, Berlusconi, and Putin. Steve Jobs has been also added to the long list of statuettes from Via Saint Gregorio Armeno. The biblical figurines from the Nativity scene (e.g., Saint Mary with baby Jesus) are displayed side by side with the caricatural statuettes of pop culture celebrities, sport stars, and politicians. The amount of Maradona figurines with the jersey of the Naples’ football team is impressive in Via Saint Gregorio Armeno. There are also places where figurines of Maradona with angel wings can be seen or purchased.

Some vendors also sell Maradona in a Nativity Scene miniature art pieces. The handmade artifacts reproduce in detail some murals and shrines dedicated to Maradona in Naples and they are sold as a presepio (Figure 5). Thus, the buyer can take home a small scale of Maradona commemorative culture in the form of a Nativity scene. The unusual souvenir has both commercial and mnemonic value, and sometimes also aesthetic value. Unlike the ubiquitous hilarious figurines representing the football player, this form of cultural production also displays spiritual underpinnings whose symbolism and meanings go beyond the celebration of pop culture celebrities.

Figure 5. The Maradona mural in Nativity scene art.

The lights are an important element of this Nativity scene, as well as the framed left foot epitomizing both the skills of the football player and the saints’ relics. There are other examples of presepe (Nativity scenes) where Maradona is represented in a religious register. Emma Ackerley conducted anthropological research on Maradona’s cultural phenomenon in Naples and revealed a rather peculiar Nativity scene at the Nilo Bar, consisting of a wine-crusher-looking presepe where a figurine of Maradona impersonates the baby Jesus.
“alongside other legendary members of S.S.C. Napoli, all in their sky-blue jerseys”. \(^{12}\) As the examples presented above suggest, the vernacular culture of commemorating Maradona has also infiltrated the Naples’s centuries old artisanal Christmas tradition of the \textit{presepe}. The history of this cultural tradition goes back to the 1700 when, “[o]n advice from the church, the ruling Bourbon Spanish monarchy encouraged artisans to include scenes of domesticity, sociability and work life in their Nativity dioramas, so that believers might find the biblical story more relatable” (Seymour 2020). The inclusion of Maradona’s cult into the Nativity dioramas can be also understood in terms of relatability.

6. Conclusions

Diego Armando Maradona’s commemoration in a sainthood semantic register in Naples and elsewhere (e.g., Argentina) is rendered visible and comprehensible in a multitude of horizons, including social, political, economic, and cultural. The religious “aura” of Maradona’s commemorative street art is socially produced and maintained by mnemonic communities who mainly identify as football lovers. Unlike the perceivers (distant observers) of art, those who indulge in Maradona’s commemorative culture are participants in a “memory event” and not simple observers. They do not merely contemplate \textit{Maradona with Halo} street art but get actively involved by adorning the places of memory—where these representations are displayed—with flowers, letters, candles, and photographs. When religion and religious symbolism are transported to street art and popular culture, the research on these matters is typically enclosed with a sociological framework (e.g., Maradona as the restorer of the disenfranchised’s dignity and \textit{joie de vivre}) and less as a matter of faith or belief per se. Thus, the culture of commemoration of Maradona in a religious register has not so much to do with faith in “heroic sanctity” and “life of virtue”, but it is rather a strategic repositioning to find emancipatory routes for those whose meaning in life and well-being are usually not celebrated as human achievement by the epistemic, political, religious, and economic authorities.

Thus, sport celebrities are venerated as “saints” when they provide fans “with a set of organized principles which give meaning to their secular strivings and sufferings” (Barnat 2019, p. 24). The commemoration of sport celebrities is also backed up by “the ‘instability’ that is manifested in the changeability of collective moods regarding who is considered an “idol”. This is reflected in popular slogans that try to show the fate of an athlete: “from zero to hero” and “from hero to zero” (Barnat 2019, p. 29). Unlike the canonized saints, the “flawed” ones are not characterized by a solid bone structure of firm virtues and attributes but rather, the peculiarity and instability of their credentials “not only point to the specificity of sporting rituals but also reveal a sense of uncertainty which essentially characterizes the modern subject”(Barnat 2019, p. 29). Maradona is no exception. His trajectory “from zero to hero” and “from hero to zero” makes his persona approachable and relatable for those who find alleviation in recalling his magnifying charisma. Moreover, street art—as a form of popular culture—also reduces the distance between art and “the people’, paving the way for those who have not been blessed with symbolic capital to participate in a culture of commemoration from below. At the same time, there are myths around Maradona’s life, and especially death, contributing to the proliferation of his culture of commemoration and “populism of spirituality”. It is Maradona’s capacity to die “metaphorically, and ‘be resurrected’, to return through creativity rather than expressing guilt, and serving punishment, and so be forgiven for any moral and social transgressions” (Free 2021, p. 110). As the Nativity scenes’ artisan Genny Di Virgilio posits: “He taught us to dream, and he is now flying with angels in heaven” (Seymour 2020).

Unlike in Latin America and the US, the veneration of the folk saints like Maradona in Italy cannot be explained through the prism of Italians feeling alienated by the Catholic Church traditions. Turning to uncanonized saints for spiritual assistance cannot be understood along the matrix “love, crime, and money”, even if Naples still has a lingering reputation of crime, drugs, and mafia resurfacing. The vernacular commemoration of Maradona as one of the saint patrons of the city still preserves cultural elements pervasive
in the official Catholic Church tradition of saints’ veneration. Although the pastiche and critique of this official memory culture of saints is not entirely absent in the popular culture of Maradona’s commemoration, the predominant narrative is rather one of complementarity between the traditional religious culture of saints’ commemoration and the flawed saints of the people movements.

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Notes


2 “The Naples management crisis” refers to the uncollected waste (including illegal toxic waste) dumping in and around the city in the beginning of the 1980s.


4 There are over 52 saint patrons of Napoli.

5 The Catholic Church’s path to declaring a saint also includes the convocation of a “devil advocate” who is expected to raise objections to the canonization to make sure that the last decision is fair, informed, and balanced.

6 See the online testimonies: https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=Saint%20Maradona (accessed on 21 July 2024).


8 When did the custom of canonizing saints start, and is it true that canonizations are infallible? Available online: https://www.catholic.com/qa/when-did-the-custom-of-canonizing-saints-start-and-is-it-true-that-canonizations-are-infallible (accessed on 21 June 2024).

9 Idem.

10 David Gibson, “Review: We do not need our saints to be perfect” Arts and Culture, 4 October 2019. Available online: https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2019/10/04/review-we-dont-need-our-saints-to-be-perfect (accessed on 17 June 2024).


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